



# KINGSHIP IV. IN SASANIAN IRAN

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*Introduction.* The Sasanian Empire (ca. 224-651 CE) was the last great oriental power of antiquity, which at its height ruled over most of Central Asia, the Near East, and Egypt. It is known to posterity not only as Rome's most formidable opponent, a crossroads for wandering merchants, itinerant monks, and religious ideas, but also as the locus of an eastern *paideia* and courtly esthetics that would hold sway over mentalities and inform artistic perceptions in West Asia and the eastern Mediterranean long after the polity that gave rise to them had vanished. It is certainly the merit of the Sasanian civilization to have engendered a conception of Persian (and *Iranicate*) culture that would eventually unseat and supersede the vestiges of Hellenism in West- and Central Asia, thereby lastingly impacting Islamic traditions that were to follow.

## THE FOUR AGES OF SASANIAN KINGSHIP

Sasanian kingship is not an immutable entity whose structure may be captured in a panoramic view. In the four centuries of Sasanian rule in the ancient world, it underwent extensive changes and caesurae, whose articulations only a careful periodization and recourse to source material, more immediate to the periods and structures under examination, may reveal (Wiesehöfer, 2021). The key to understanding and the criterion for delimitating these periods are changes within the royal titlature that are



reflected on [Sasanian coinage](#) (q.v.), but also, for the early period, in the epigraphic material ([EPIGRAPHY i. OLD PERSIAN AND MIDDLE IRANIAN EPIGRAPHY](#)), and occasionally on gems (Huyse, 2006, pp. 182-93; Shayegan, 2013). Indeed, the numismatic evidence exhibits only *four* radical departures in the royal titlature—(1) *šāhān šāh* “king of kings”; (2) *kay*; (3) *abzōn* “increase”; and (4) *xwarrah abzūd* “increased is the (royal/epic) glory”—each being indicative of vicissitudes within ideological and political conceptions of Sasanian kingship and possibly announcing the emergence of new historical paradigms. These departures in the conception of kingship, are perforce reflected in the multitude of events and structures (social, economic, and mental) that define Sasanian history and the ages that bestow unity and coherence upon them. These four ages have been expediently called: (1) the *Šāhān Šāh* period; (2) the *Kayanid* period; (3) the *Abzōnate*; and (4) the *Abzūd* period.

From the establishment of the empire by [Ardašīr I](#) (q.v.) up to the reign of Yazdegerd II (q.v.), ca. 224-439, the title of the Sasanian sovereigns, despite minor alterations, remained: *mazdēs n bay* [name of the sovereign] *šāhān šāh Ērān (ud An-ērān) kē čīhr az yazdān*, “His Mazdean Majesty [name of the sovereign] king of kings of Iran(ians) (and non-Iran[ians]) whose seed is from the gods.” The title of “king of kings of Iran,” which was established by Ardašīr, augmented by the important element *ud An-ērān* “and non-Iran(ians)” under [Šāpur I](#) (q.v.), with ephemeral omission of the selfsame under Narseh (q.v.; Huyse, 2006, pp. 183-84), thus represented *mutatis mutandis* the core of the Sasanian titlature during this period. Under Yazdegerd II and up to and including Kawād I (q.v.), the titlature changed considerably. The main constant of the titulary being *šāhān šāh Ērān* disappeared entirely and was replaced by the title *kay*, which referred to a mythical and heroic sovereign (Huyse, 2006, p.186; Daryaei, 2006a, pp. 500-501). The titlature—except for Walāxš ([BALĀŠ](#)) and Zāmasp ([JĀMĀSP](#))—included the title *kay* after the king’s name: *mazdēs n bay (rāmšahr) kay* [name of the sovereign], and later only [name of the sovereign] *kay*. It was during the reign of Kawād I that the next change in the titlature took place. Under [Kōsrow I](#) (q.v.), the king was neither called *šāhān šāh*, nor *kay*. Only the king’s name occurred, and beginning with his sixth year, it was followed by the term *abzōn* “increase”: [name of the sovereign] *abzōn*. The next change in Sasanian titlature occurred under [Kōsrow II](#) (q.v.), when the name of the sovereign was followed by the expression *xwarrah abzūd*: [name of the sovereign] *xwarrah abzūd* “increased is the (royal/epic) glory of/by [name of the sovereign].” However, [Kōsrow II](#)



also occasionally used the term *abzōn*, as well as for the first time after the early period, the element *šāhān šāh* (*Husraw šāhān šāh xwarrah abzūd*), which was undoubtedly a consequence of his Byzantine policy and may have reflected a conscious reference to the political program of his victorious predecessors, notably Šāpur II (q.v.).

*The “šāhān šāh” period.* The first age is marked by the empire’s tenuous confrontation with Rome and the formulation of a universalist ideology in the political realm, as expressed in the title of “king of kings of the Iranians (and non-Iranians),” as well as the attempt to come to terms with the impact of two universalist religions, [Christianity](#) and [Manicheism](#) (qq.v.). Although opinions differ as to the rationale behind the offensives of the first Sasanian rulers, it is not likely that they were from the beginning motivated by the desire to revive Achaemenid traditions, and Roman accounts to that effect ought to be taken with skepticism (Shayegan, 2004 [2008]; idem, 2011, pp. 1-38). However, at the latest, beginning with Šāpur I, the neo-Persian empire seems to have made its universalist claim to (co-)regency known, if we are to interpret the addition of the element *ud Anērān* “and non-Iran(ians)” to the royal title as the manifestation of such encompassing projection of power. It may thus be assumed that the idea of *šahr ī Ērān ud Anērān* “Empire of Iran(ians) and non-Iran(ians)” was meant to be an ideological riposte to Rome’s notion of *imperium sine fine* (Börm, 2008, pp. 426-27). Universalist ambitions of the kind that we see actualized through the unity of the Christian faith and *romanitas*, following the Constantinian shift in Rome—that is, a powerful ideological mix that could be projected onto other cultural spheres—were unattainable for the Sasanian polity, whose ethnic, ancestral faith, Zoroastrianism (q.v.; also called Mazdaism on account of the name of the supreme divinity in the Iranian pantheon, Ohrmazd < [Ahura Mazdā](#)/Ahuramazdā [q.v.]) was intrinsically incapable of projecting universalism. To compensate for this lacuna, and unable to impose doctrinal uniformity, the Sasanian empire would later, under the rule of Šāpur II’s grandson, namely, [Yazdegerd I](#) (q.v.) reinvent the concept of universality not through the forcible leveling of the religious landscape and its subjugation to the precepts of one dominating faith, but by embracing the diversity of faiths within the realm, as if they were alternate religious manifestations of the empire itself. Prior to Yazdegerd I, the early Sasanians under Šāpur I seem to have dived with Manicheism as an alternative to, or possibly a suppletive form of, Mazdaism to project universality in the religious realm as well. The global aspirations of the Manichean religion, which Mani (q.v.) ought to have deliberately stressed, in



order to conform with the perceived ambitions of the Persian king—as well as the similarities his teachings exhibited with the Mazdean cosmogony (see [COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY](#)) and divinities, which again were intentionally calibrated to conform to Iranian religious perceptions—must have rendered Manicheism’s ability to contribute, unlike any other religion before it, to the *imperial project* of its royal patron, by synthesizing religious diversity (BeDuhn, p. 266), attractive to Šāpur I. However, as the later disgrace and execution of Mani at the incitation of the chief-magus (*mowbed ud ēhrbed*) [Kartīr](#) (q.v.), clearly indicates, the empire’s first (and promising) attempt at transcending the limitations imposed by an ethnic religious system were nullified.

*The Kayanid age.* The second age represents the empire’s dramatic shift toward its eastern expanse and the danger of Hunnic invasions (see [HUNS](#)). This was also a time of profound receptivity to Iranian mytho-epic conceptions. This shift, which had already begun under the reigns of Yazdegerd I and [Bahram V Gōr](#) (q.v.), only to reach its climax under Yazdegerd II and his successor Pērōz (FĪRŪZ), may have been caused by the arrival of belligerent Hunnic tribes on the empire’s eastern borders. The mobilization of the empire’s resources in the East may have given rise to a more accelerated and sustained reception of eastern mytho-epic (oral) traditions, as reflected, among others, in the Younger [Avesta](#) and the [Zand](#) (qq.v.), that is, the old Mazdean scriptures and their Middle Persian exegesis. Indeed, Sasanian warfare against Hunnic tribes may have eventually evoked the antagonism prevailing between the mythical Kayanian (*kauuaitia-*) rulers of Iran (see [KAYĀNIĀN](#)) and their eastern Turanian (*tūiriia-*) foes; what is more, this opposition, in time possibly prompted the adoption of the title *kay*, which derived from the selfsame Young Avestan title (*kauui-*) the mythical kings of Iran bore in the fight against the eastern Turanians. Consequently, under the sway of the Kayanid reception, the Sasanians in the age of Yazdegerd II, considering themselves heirs to the archetypal Iranian king-hero Frēdōn ([FERĒDŪN](#))—who ruled over three climes: the Roman West = Hrōm/Rūm; the heartland = Iran; and the eastern expanse = Tūrān—could have regarded not only Roman possessions in the West, but also Turanian lands disputed by the Hephthalites (q.v.) in the East, as belonging to Frēdōn’s empire, and may have sought through the adoption of the Kayanid title *kay* symbolically to lay claim to them (Daryaei, 2006b, pp. 389-93; Wiesehöfer, 2005a, pp. 144-45; 2005b, pp.114-16). The erection of the massive defensive brick wall(s) of Gorgān (and Tamiša; [GORGĀN iv. ARCHAEOLOGY](#); [TAMIŠA WALL](#)) that stretched from the



Caspian Sea (q.v.) in the west over two hundred kilometers to the east (Sauer et al., 2013, p. 614; Howard-Johnston, 2012, p. 106), as well as the “Caspian Gates” (q.v.), the defensive fortifications of the Dariali Gorge to control the trans-Caucasian traffic—possibly erected already in late 4th century CE (Sauer et al., 2019, pp. 871-72)—represent major imperial investments to ward off the Hephthalite threat. They were most likely initiated by Yazdegerd II and brought to fruition by Pērōz (Sauer et al., 2013, p. 614; Howard-Johnston, 2012, p.106). The Gorgān wall constituted one of the longest defensive barriers of Antiquity, and appears to have necessitated substantial resources to build, maintain, and man. An estimated thirty fortifications along the wall, as well as a handful of sizable base camps procured an estimated thirty thousand standing troops to guard the wall and the northeastern frontiers of the empire against the Hephthalites (Sauer et al., 2013, pp. 234, 613-16).

The significance of introducing the title *kay* may be measured in religious matters as well. Under Yazdegerd I, the empire underwent a dramatic shift in its religious policy and sought to maintain political cohesion among its disparate religious communities by domesticizing their structures of governance and partially acculturating their constituents to the Iranian element (Bakhos and Shayegan, pp. xiv–xv). Thus, not only the Jewish institution of the *Exilarchate* (q.v.), which may well have been a Sasanian creation (Herman, pp. 117-33), but also the institutionalization of the Persian Church, may be deemed as an attempt at integrating these different religious forces into the confines of the Sasanian state, which in spite of the Mazdean character of its dominant ethno-class, had found no remedy other than to promote confessional co-existence as a means of pacification (Bakhos and Shayegan, pp. xiv–xv); thence possibly the title of Yazdegerd I as *rāmšahr* “(who) pacifies the empire” (Huyse, 2006, p.185). Under Yazdegerd II, however, we may observe a reaction to the concept of a nascent “multi-confessional” empire, and the very sources of this legitimacy may be found in the Avestan-inspired mytho-epic reception of the Iranian past. The adoption of the title *kay* simultaneously announced its transcendental/cosmic nature, whence Sasanian kingship perceived itself to derive, and its indubitably Mazdean quality. The new *kay*’s attempt at reintroducing Mazdaism in Armenia (see [ARMENIA AND IRAN ii. THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD](#)), or re-subjecting the Christians of Iran to persecution are testimony to the religious quality inherent in the title.

The next change in titulature, announced already under the reign of Kawād I, was completed under Kōsrow I, when the titles *šāhān šāh* and *kay* disappeared



and only the king's bare name followed by the term *abzōn* "increase" became the norm. The meaning of the term *abzōn* is not to be grasped intuitively; it could, as the next transformation of the royal title, namely, *xwarrah abzūd* "increased is the (royal) glory" might imply, be a reference to the strengthening of the royal glory, or along a comparable line of thought, merely signal the empire's recovery, in the wake of Pērōz's disastrous demise. It is this latter construal that we shall retain, hence, regarding the third age as one of deep turmoil and recovery.

*The Abzōnate.* This age, which would be dominated by the reigns of Kawād and his son Kōsrow I, is also intimately associated with the "Mazdakite" movement, the emergence and containment of which shaped the royal ideology at the dawn of the later empire (Gnoli, pp. 439-56; Wiesehöfer, 2009; Börm, 2007, pp. 230-33). This movement, which profoundly shook the foundations of the Sasanian state, was attributed by later sources to a certain Mazdak, reportedly a former/heretic Mazdean priest, who sought to establish a new social regime, wherein class distinctions would be attenuated by dint of wealth distribution and communal access to (aristocratic?) women. It is possible to presume that in the aftermath of the economic hardship caused by Pērōz's death, and oppressive ransoms levied by the Hephthalites, a socio-religious movement, associated with a charismatic leader, might have arisen. It has been most recently argued that Mazdakites, far from being revolutionaries seeking the redistribution of wealth, were actually professing a more ascetic way of life (de Blois, 2012, pp. 20-24) and intent on altering—within the broader confines of the Zoroastrian belief system—the norms requiring Mazdean priests to officiate at ritual practices, as well as those regulating the allocation of animal offerings. The consequences of these changes were to lessen the presence of Mazdean priests and their clientele in the appropriation of economic benefits resulting from sacrifices and to favor the deprived and needy as the recipients of offerings, rather than the "righteous men" advocated by the clergy (Macuch, pp. 159-64). The Mazdakite aim to favor the needy and "hungry" hence could have been consistent with the dire economic circumstances the Sasanian empire faced in the period following the Hephthalite sway over Iran. It is equally conceivable that Kawād may have, as the result of a political *calcul*, assented to the movement's rise, using its nascent thrust to restrain disenchanting social strata most affected by the effects of war and retribution efforts. In this, the relation between the king and the Mazdakite front provides some analogy with the political will manifested by Šāpur I vis-à-vis Manicheism, which ephemerally served as an



experiment in the Sasanian quest for a universalist religion. In both cases, the institution of kingship, on account of its political exigency, could have used, guided, and emboldened these movements, before eventually thwarting their thrust, and eliminating their leaders and adherents. However, since contemporaneous sources, such as Procopius (q.v.) and Joshua the Stylite (*Chronicle*, 20; Luther, pp. 44-45, 137-44) do not mention Mazdak—only Muslim chronicles, such as Ṭabari’s history, and late 9th-century Middle Persian compilations (the *Bundahišn*, *Dēnkard*, *Pahlavi Widēwdād*, and the *Zand ī Wahman Yašt*) know of Mazdak—and make Kawād solely responsible for enabling, or consenting to, the communal possession of women, the historicity of Mazdak *and* the economic dimension (that is, the allocation of offerings/wealth redistribution?) of the movement is open to question.

The accusation of forced communal access to women by the “Mazdakite” movement is reflected in most sources—*zan ud frazand ud xwāstag pad hamīh ud hambāyīh abāyēd dāštan framūd* “He [Mazdak] ordered that wives (*zan*), children, and belongings should be held [by men] in common (*pad hamīh*) and in co-partnership (*hambāyīh*)” (*Bundahišn*, 33.24; Pakzad, pp. 367-68; Agostini and Thrope, p. 174)—and must hence be taken seriously. Recently, it has again been argued that the notion of communal access to women ought to be differently interpreted (Macuch, pp. 165-69). Mazdakites, it appears, rejected the strict Zoroastrian laws on succession, which exclusively sanctioned patrimonial lineages, and instead recognized matrilineal descent: *ud zahagīh gōwēnd kū paywand pad mādarān gōwēnd ... čiyōn ān ī gurg zahag pas mādar awēšān-iz paywand pad mādarān kunēnd* “and they [the Mazdakites] would advertise the principle of matrimonial descent (*zahagīh*), that is, lineage through mothers (*pad mādarān*) ... [and] in the same way as the wolf’s offspring belongs thereafter to the mother, they also established lineage through mothers” (*Dēnkard* 7.7.24). Since one of the main functions of women in élite, aristocratic circles (either as wives or daughters) consisted in assuring the continuity of their houses by providing a successor to the *paterfamilias* (*sālār*), any revision to the principle of patrimonial succession ought to have been deemed as socially revolutionary. The picture that emerges from the late Sasanian law book *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān* (q.v.) “Book of a Thousand Decisions” (whose norms ought to have been applicable to the social realities of the fifth century CE as well) is that of a Sasanian élite obsessively preoccupied with the issue of patrimonial succession but in all appearance diminished in its reproductive abilities, most likely on account of incessant endogamous alliances (see [MARRIAGE ii. NEXT OF KIN MARRIAGE IN](#)



## ZOROASTRIANISM).

What the Mazdakite movement—in the aftermath of the Hephthalite defeat, which undoubtedly diminished the ranks of the nobility—may have advocated was precisely the ability for Sasanian elite women to procreate outside the confines of kin relations, thereby sensibly bolstering the probability of reproduction, even though in manifest defiance of Mazdean precepts. This might have been a proposition King Kawād could have tacitly tolerated, in order to evade a demographic crisis within the ranks of his nobility (Elman, pp. 273-76). One of the consequences of Kawād’s policy of *laisser-aller* vis-à-vis the Mazdakites, if substantiated, may be gauged by the reforms with which Kōsrow I is generally credited (see [KOSROW I ii. REFORMS](#)). Indeed, he is believed to have laid the foundation for a knighthood, whose ranks were constituted partially from among the selfsame offspring the Mazdakite movement and its permissive stance toward matrimonial succession had generated, and which Kōsrow I had collectively adopted as his wards (Nöldeke, p. 164). The initial embrace of Mazdakite precepts by Kawād, as well as the reforms initiated by Kōsrow I, all point to the inescapable realization that the two opposing forces, which from the outset had been shaping the empire’s grand ambitions—that is, on the one hand, the push for political universality as a means to negotiate the imperial *other* (Rome) and the nascent Central Asian polities, as well as to contain the religious diversity within the borders, *and* on the other hand, the limitations imposed on the selfsame ambitions by a religious system rooted in the Iranian *ethnogenesis*—had also important reverberations on the empire’s social fabric.

Cosanguineous marriages and endogamous alliances were merely other realizations of the same spirit that had time and again thwarted the universalist *ouvertures* of Sasanian sovereigns. In this context, the toleration of Mazdakite *mores* by Kawād, which apparently did break away from endogamous practices, might be deemed *in essence* akin to the universalist designs of Šāpur I and Yazdegerd I in its ambition to meet the exigencies of a global empire, this time by opening up the ranks of a stratified and endangered aristocracy.

*The Abzūd period.* The last period is marked from the outset by the steady decline of Sasanian royal authority, which was heralded by the uprising of the commander [Bahrām VI Čōbīn](#) (q.v.) against his rightful sovereign Hormozd IV (q.v.; r. 579-91 CE). The legitimacy of the Sasanian royal house was grounded upon the conception that the nimbus of kingship, the *xwarrah* (see [FARR\[AH\]](#)),



was bestowed upon the house of Ardašīr and his progeny following the latter's triumph over the Arsacids (q.v.) and the establishment of a new Iranian empire (see below *Succession*). The seizure of power by Bahrām VI Čōbīn was the first attempt by an imperial grandee to challenge the authority of the Sasanian house and to contest openly the inherited right of its members to rulership.

Several factors had contributed to the frictions between the crown and the nobility. Kōsrow I's social and economic reforms had led the way for Kōsrow II's policy of expansion, but may have also sown the seeds of dissention between the king and his subjects. In the wake of the Mazdakite "revolution," the royal house appears to have subjected the nobility to greater scrutiny and state control by levying regularly imposts and taxes, not only on royal demesnes, but on the totality of the empire's cultivated surface (Wiesehöfer, 2010, pp. 138, 141; Gariboldi). Moreover, the establishment by the crown of a potent military nobility, whose members were not only equipped, but also endowed with fiefs in return for military service, created a formidable, uniform force accountable to the sovereign. The dramatic increase of the state incomes, further enhanced by poll tax and Byzantine indemnities under Kōsrow I, had created an economically powerful state that would have possessed the means as well as the military capacity to sustain a large-scale campaign aimed at overpowering Byzantium, when the ideological underpinning for such an enterprise was put into place under Kōsrow II (Greatrex, 2007, p. 123). These reforms, albeit salutary for the fortunes of the state, may have also led to the deterioration of the traditional bonds between the nobiliary houses and the king under Hormozd IV and Kōsrow II, to the extent that members of the high nobility (*wuzurg* "grandee")—such as the commanders Bahrām VI Čōbīn of the Mehrān family, and later Farrōkān Šahrwarāz of the Warāz family—dared to reach for the throne, and thus challenge the legitimacy of the Sasanian dynasty. The promotion of the lower nobility (*āzād* "freeman") and the enfeoffment of the knighthood (*dehqān* [q.v.]) undertaken with the intent of establishing a military class that, being economically secured, would provide a counterweight to the potency of the high nobility, did not yield the intended result. Increased affluence may have prompted the rapprochement of the military class with the high aristocracy—from among whose ranks such military leaders as Bahrām VI Čōbīn and Farrōkān Šahrwarāz had arisen—with whom, beyond economic interests, it shared a common *ethos*. Thus, the military class, originally created as a possible bulwark against the aspirations of the high nobility, may have



eventually contributed to the erosion of royal power due to its increasing affinity with the selfsame nobility. In order to prevent the accession of Bahrām VI Čōbīn, whose victorious campaigns had elevated him to an exalted position, whence he could defy royal legitimacy, Kōsrow II may have agreed (in concert with his maternal uncles) to overthrow his father Hormozd IV, the principal object of Bahrām’s enmity, and possibly acquiesce to his assassination (Howard-Johnston, 2010). However, his regicide falling short of preventing Bahrām VI Čōbīn from seeking the throne, Kōsrow II was eventually constrained to take refuge in Byzantium, whence he set out to retake his empire with Byzantine troops in return for territorial concessions (Howard-Johnston, 2010; Rubin, pp. 643-44; Whitby, 1988, pp. 250-304).

The rebellion of Bahrām having already diminished the prestige of the Sasanian house, Kōsrow II’s act of regicide (or acquiescence thereto), as well as Byzantine intervention in Persia’s internal affairs at Kōsrow’s instigation, followed by territorial concessions, decisively shattered the nimbus of Sasanian rule. The war of conquest waged against Byzantium by Kōsrow II, could have aimed at increasing the Sasanian dynastic fortune, and by the same token, resuscitating the Achaemenid empire, historical knowledge of which (through Roman intermediary), interwoven with epic elaboration seem to have been commonplace in Sasanian Iran since Šāpur II. One should not underestimate the symbolic importance of Byzantium suspending the payment of subsidies to Persia toward the defense of their common borders against foreign intruders, or of Justin II’s negotiating with the newly emerging Turkic power to form an alliance against the Sasanian state, which gave rise to a new chapter in the Roman and Persian relations (Whitby, 2001, pp. 91-94). With the discontinuation of subsidies, both empires adopted a confrontational attitude, which first led to Justin II’s thwarted campaign against the Sasanian empire in 572-73, eventually to the first Roman intervention in Persia’s internal affairs by the emperor Maurice, and finally to the ill-inspired attempt of Kōsrow II to overpower Byzantium (Whitby, 2001, pp. 102-4; Howard-Johnston, 2006, pp. 93-113; Shahīd).

Thus, the elimination of subsidies, which up to Justin II had ideologically warranted the interdependence between Rome and Persia, may have ultimately given rise to a confrontational stance. Kōsrow II, by conquering, albeit ephemerally, all of Byzantium’s eastern possessions seems to have implemented this logic to the letter. Indeed, Kōsrow II’s territorial expansion to an extent never experienced since the Achaemenids may be regarded as the



instauration of a new empire that, surpassing in glory even Ardašīr's founding act, invested the Sasanian house with new legitimacy. The legend on Kōsrow II's coinage *Husraw xwarrah abzūd* "Kōsrow whose *xwarrah* is increased; Kōsrow, by whom the *xwarrah* is increased," seems to indicate the king's political agenda of a Sasanian renewal subsequent to his seizure of power in Persia, inasmuch as the subsequent reintroduction of the old Sasanian title *šāhān šāh* "king of kings", this time with possible allusions to the Persians of old, was indicative of an Achaemenid revival—a fact further substantiated by preparatory measures to emplace monumental reliefs at the sites of Bisotun and Naqš-e Rostam (qq.v.), on a scale dwarfing all prior Sasanian undertakings. Eventually, Kōsrow's hubris, that is, his desire to rule as a *kosmokrator*, rather than the co-ruler of the world, led to the fall of the empire, just a few decades after it had reached its greatest geographical expansion, holding sway over an expanse seen only under the Achaemenids.

#### REPRESENTATION OF THE KING AND THE ESSENCE OF KINGSHIP

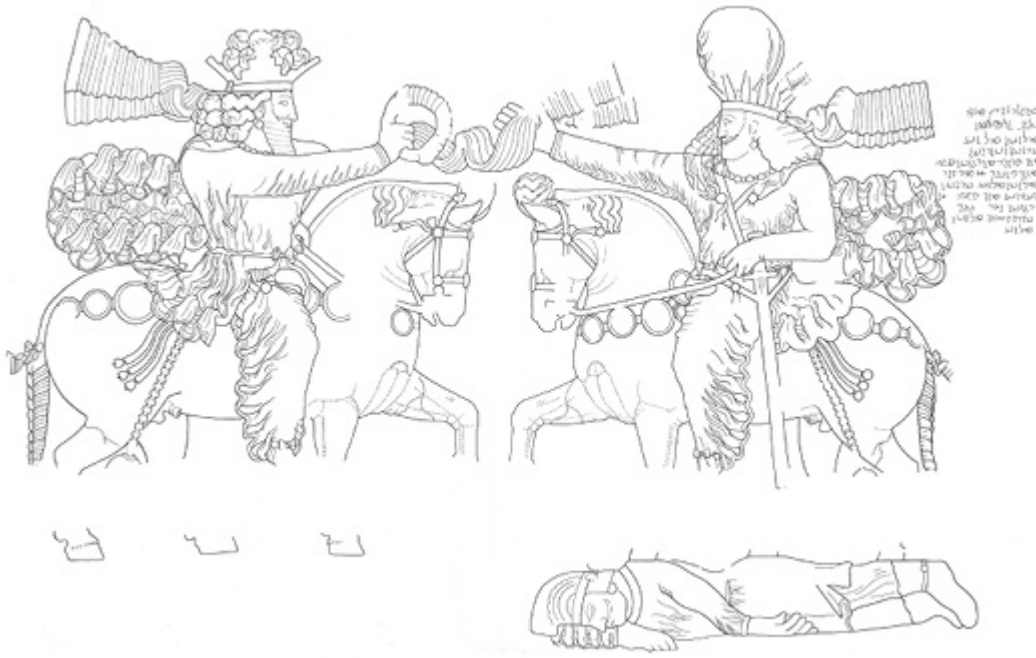


Figure 1. Investiture and triumph of Narseh over Wahnām, son of Tadrōs (Bīšāpūr 5). Originally relief of Bahrām I, whose inscription was emendated to reflect Narseh's ownership, and with the possible addition of Wahnām. From Herrmann and Howell, 1981, fig. 2. © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Fotoarchiv Teheran, all rights reserved.



The decidedly Mazdean character of Sasanian kingship is well captured in early Sasanian rock reliefs (q.v.), which, in spite of their relative thematic variety, often exhibit scenes of divine investiture (Canepa, pp. 861, 863). Therein, the king is shown as the recipient of the royal glory (*xwarrah*), symbolized by a diadem being extended by the god Ohrmazd (illustrated as an anthropomorphic figure), which not only alluded to the divine sanction of Sasanian kingship (also articulated in the formula: *kē čīhr az yazdān* “whose seed is from the gods”), but also to its intrinsically Mazdean character (evinced in the expression *mazdēsni bay* “[His] Mazdean majesty”) (Alram, Blet-Lemarquand, and Skjærvø, pp. 30-33). The cosmic dimension of Sasanian kingship, as Ohrmazd’s instrument against the evil forces of Ahriman (q.v.), may be furthermore observed in a number of equestrian investiture (INVESTITURE iii. SASANIAN PERIOD) and triumph reliefs, through the parallel portrayal of the king and god Ohrmazd trampling with their horses on foes, abjectly thrown under the mounts’ hooves, and who may be identified with historical enemies (such as, Ardawān IV [see ARTABANUS IV] or Gordian III) on the one side, and Ahriman on the other (Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rostam 1; and Šāpur I at Bišāpūr 1) (Canepa, p. 863, fig. 45.1; Vanden Berghe, pp. 66-67, pl. 18; and 72-73; Herrmann, pp. 69-71, 76-78; Herrmann, MacKenzie, and Howell, pp. 7-10, fig. 1). Thus, the parity created between opposite cosmic forces Ohrmazd/Ahriman, as well as the king and his enemies, is yet another indication of the perception of kingship as intrinsically interwoven into the fabric of the Mazdean cosmic struggle in early Sasanian Iran (Canepa, pp. 865-66).

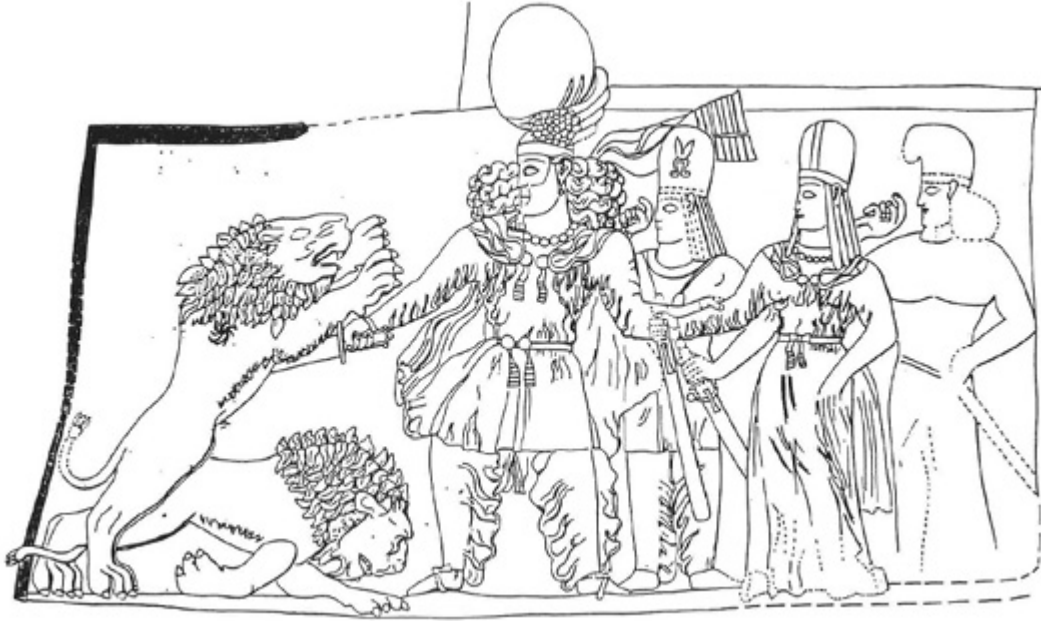


Figure 2. Relief of Bahrām II at Sar-e Mašhad, depicting the king confronting two lions and holding hands with a female figure (likely the queen). Two dignitaries stand behind the king: the high priest (mowbed) Kartīr with a pair of scissors on his tall hat as heraldic emblem (*nišān*); and an unknown personage. Trümpelmann, 1975, plate 7, with the addition of the ornament added on the shoulder of the attacking lion by Tanabe, 1990, p. 30, Fig. 2b. © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Fotoarchiv Teheran, all rights reserved.

This equivalency is further manifest in the Sasanian inscriptions, in particular, in that of King Narseh at Paikuli (late 3rd century CE), who accuses his nephew Bahrām III (q.v.) to have been unjustly helped upon the throne, through the deception (*drōžanīf/dōžanīh*) of a certain Wahnām, son of Tadrōs (Tatrus), described as a villain (*wadgar* “evil-doer”; Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, B1,04), in league with “Ahriman and the demons” (*Wahnām ī Tadrōsān [pad] xwēbēh drōžanīf* (Parth.) *ud [pušt] ī Ahreman ud dēwān [pad Sagān šāh sar] dēhēm bandēd*, “Wahnām, son of Tadrōs, [through] his own falsehood and with [the help] of Ahriman and the devils attached the Diadem [to the head of the king of Sakas]”; Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, A7,02–A15,02; Weber, 2010a, pp. 353-94; Shayegan, 2012, pp. 109-38). Once more, we see Ahriman’s agent (here Wahnām, son of Tadrōs) prostrate and trodden down by the king’s horse on Narseh’s equestrian investiture relief at Bišāpūr (q.v.; Figure 1); (Herrmann and Howell, pp.18-19, fig. 2; Gyselen, 2005 [2009], pp. 29-36). In Bahrām II’s (q.v.) relief at Sar Mašhad (Figure 2), the king is portrayed confronting two



lions, one already slain and lying on the ground and the other being thrust with the king's sword, while he is protecting his queen, held by the hand, and imperial dignitaries, among them the chief magus (*mobed*) Kartīr, standing in the foreground (Trümpelmann, plate 7; Tanabe, p. 30, Fig. 2b). It is likely that the depiction of the two lions in this context was symbolically referring to the Sasanian king as the champion of the *weh dēn* "good religion" (see [BEHDĪN](#)) confronting (the creations of) darkness and evil, which on a less allegorical register referred to the enemies of the empire under Bahrām II, themselves manifestations of darkness/evil: his rebel brother, [Hormozd Kušānšāh](#) (q.v.); and the Roman emperor Carus (Shayegan, 2020-21, pp. 6-9).

*The king's qualities and ethics.* Nowhere may the idealized personal virtues and ethics of the king in contemporaneous sources be better assessed than in the inscription of King Narseh at Paikuli, where the shortcomings and vices of the evildoer(s) are systematically opposed to the perceived virtues the king must possess, in order to rule. In contrast to Wahnām, the agent of Evil, who is supported by Ahriman and the devils, the king is assisted by the gods: *ud Wahnām kū wēnēd [kū pad pušt ī] (yazdān) xwarrah ud šahr-xwadāyīh ō amā dād ud dānēd kū*, "and Wahnām when he saw [that with the help of] gods, glory and rulership had been given to Us, then he knew that ..." (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, E4,03–d15,05); [*p*]as amā pad puš[t] ud [n]ām ī yazdān ud xwēš [... pad gāh ī] pidar ud niyāgān ēstēm, "then We with the support and in the name of the gods and our own [...] ascended [the throne of?] (our) father and ancestors" (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.2, p. 119; and 3.1, NPi, 43H9,02–H14,02). Whereas the distinctive vices of Wahnām are qualified as *drōzanīh* "deceit; falsehood" and *ǰādūgīh* "sorcery," Narseh is praised for his *farroxīh* "fortune" and *frazānagīh* "wisdom": *anī-tān kēž hamyōnag nē būd [kē ...] yazdān \*pargasād ahād [ud pad farr]oxīh* (MPers.) *ud frazānagīf ud xwēbeh m[ardīf? čē Aryān]šahr istambag ...* "(because ever since then) nobody else has been similar to You [whom ...] the gods have favored? [and (who) by Your fortune? and wisdom and Own m[anliness? have kept?] oppression [away from Ērān-]šahr ..." (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, f14,06–g7-8,01). Whereas Wahnām is accused of being against the gods and the whole realm, Narseh is described as most dutiful in the service of gods and best suited to warrant the security of the realm. The king's suitability reposes, as we learn, aside from the aforesaid personal qualities of the prince, upon the candidate's piety toward the gods, as well as his ability to safeguard [Ērānšahr](#) (q.v.): *ag šahrδār [zānānd kū ... keš ast kē] až amāh pad yazadān rāštistar ud abardar ud kerdagānistar ahēndē \*āgām Aryānšahr až amāh \*padrāmistar ud [wišidāxw ādūg ahēndē*



*dirdan ud Pārsān kār framādan ...*], “if the Landholders [know that in Ērānšahr there is someone who] would be more righteous and better and more pious with respect to the gods, or [would be more able] than Ourselves [to keep] Ērānšahr in peace [and confident and to govern the Persian army/people ...]” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, f4-5,03–f3,04). As the Paikuli inscription further reveals, the sum of virtues expected in a king, as well as the procedure for electing the most suitable candidate for rulership, had been in place since the rule of the first Sasanian kings, Ardašīr I and Šāpur I: *bē kē (dānēd) kū [andar Ērānšahr] kas ast kē az Šābuhr šāh rāštistar* (Parth.) *ud pad yazdān kerdagārdar ayāb wehdar ud pas ēn Ērānšahr \*pā[ddom ud drusttar?] ādūg dāštan ud (framādan) kū (Šābuhr šāh) ōy ēw gōwēd*, “but, whoever may know [that in Ērānšahr?] there is someone who may be more righteous than king Šāpur and more officious in the service of the gods, or better, and (who) hereafter (may be) able to keep this Ērānšahr [better] (guarded) [and healthier?] and to govern (it better) than king? Šāpur, let him say (so)!” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, F6,04—F18,04–1,05).

Thus, schematically, since the foundation of the empire, as typified in the personae of the early Sasanian kings, notably Šāpur I, a suitable king must be bestowed with *farroxīh* “fortune” and *frazānagīh* “wisdom,” which are derived from the gods and make the king more officious in the services of gods and the safeguard of the empire, hence, rendering him *rāsttar* “more righteous,” *wēhdar* “better,” and *kerdagāndom* “most pious” (Table 1).

## SUCCESSION

The succession of a candidate to royal dignity, in addition to the personal virtues he exhibited, also reposed on a number of other factors: one being the lineage, that is, descent from the house of Sāsān (*tōm ī Sāsānagān* “house [of the descendants] of Sāsān”), the eponymous founder; yet another factor, at least in the early empire, was the approbation of the candidate by (a) nobiliary council(s) representing the leading great houses of the empire.

*The king’s pedigree.* In the inscription of Narseh at Paikuli, the king’s pedigree is clearly mentioned as the foremost quality: *ōy [andar tōm ī] Sāsān(agān?) ud hamāg šahr mard[ān Ar]mi[nā]n šā[h mahist ud pāhl]om* ‘And he [among the family] (of) Sāsān and the men? of the whole realm, the king of Armenia? [= Narseh] is the greatest and best’ (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, A12,05–A17,05).



*Councils.* The inscription of Narseh reports that the Persian and Parthian dignitaries on two occasions held a council to debate the subject of succession: once to invite the prince to seize the crown (which was constitutive), and once more to confirm his suitability (Shayegan, 2012, pp. 127-32). In the first council, the Persian and Parthian nobility (assembled in Asōristān [q.v.]) decided to support Narseh in assuming rulership: *ud Pārs ud (Pahlaw) [ud any kē?] Asōrestān pad pāhrag \*ānānd ān hanzaman kūnēnd [ud] (gowēnd) [kū]: [... Sagān šāh [... agar? ādūg] hād Pārsān kār framādan ud (šahr) [dāštan ...]*, “And then the Persians and Parthians and others who were in Asōristān at the watch-post, those made a council [and s]aid [that]: [...] (Narseh) the king of Sakas [...] [if he w]ere [able] to govern the Per[sian people] in arms [then ...]”; (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, A12,04—A5–6,05). In the second council, the candidate’s suitability was reconfirmed: *anī-tān kēž hamyōnag nē būd [kē ...] yazadān \*pargasād ahād [ud pad] farroxīh (MPers.) ud frazānagīf ud xwēbeh m[ardīf? čē Aryān]šahr istambag ...*, “(because ever since then) nobody else has been similar to You [whom ...] the gods have favored? [and (who) by Your? Fortune? and wisdom and Own [courage? have kept?] oppression [away from Ērān-]šahr ...” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, f14,06—g7–8,01); *[ēg pad x]wēš gāh ud padix[šar ī] pidar ud [niyā]gān ēstēd kū [... Ērān-]šahr tis gām rā[st ...] (ud) askādar (Parth.) [hād]*, “[therefore (do now)] ascend Your throne and (receive) the honor(s) [of] (your) father and ancestors, so that [henceforth ... in Ērān?]šahr things ... [will be more?] righteous? [...] and higher” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, G6,06—G13,06).

*Past procedures for a king’s election.* We are also aware, again through Narseh’s inscription, of existing procedures for establishing the suitability of a royal candidate, dating back to the time of the empire’s foundation, namely, the rules of Ardašīr I and Šāpur I. Narseh is reported to have convoked a council on his own, which presumably assisted him in the interpretation of past procedure(s), by evoking the judgment of past dignitaries who had made Šāpur I the protector of the realm: *[...] agar ēw bār Šābuhr šāhān šah pāsdārīg kerd u-šān pāsdārīgān padixšar dād ēg-iz-išān [...] ī Ērān-šahr [...] rāy hamwašt u-šān wizār ēd-ōwōn kerd [kū]*, “and if once, they made Šāpur, the king of kings the Guardian, and since they gave honor to the guardians, then also [...] on account of the Empire of the Iranians they gathered and made the following determination/interpretation that: [...]” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, F15,03—F3–4,04; Cereti and Terribili, p. 376). It seems that the procedure required the king to be confirmed in his rule only after having been publicly challenged by other possible contestant(s). Indeed, were the dignitaries to



know of another/other candidate(s), who would be more virtuous, more pious toward the gods, or more able to safeguard Ērānšahr, then, so the procedure seems to indicate, they might have contested the aptitude of the (selected?) king. Were the king to remain unchallenged, that is, deemed to be the most suited for the job, he would be confirmed in his rulership. Having thus set the framework for the election/confirmation procedure by dint of past judgments, Narseh proceeded by defying the dignitaries to find a better candidate than he himself, which they do not: *ag šahrδār [zānānd kū ... keš ast kē] aš amāh pad yazadān rāštistar ud abardar ud kerdagānistar ahēndē \*āgām Aryān-šahr aš amāh \*padrāmistar ud [wišidāxw ādūg ahēndē dirdan ud Pārsān kār framādan ...] ud dušmenīn passox (dādan) hō awās hēb wāžēd kū šahr ud paδgōs [xwadāw hō bawād kē] (ādūg) hāδ šahr dirdan ud framādan* “if the Landholders [know that (in Ērānšahr) there is someone who?] would be more righteous and better and more pious with respect to the gods, or [would be more able] than Ourselves [to keep] Ērānšahr in peace [and confident and to govern the Persian people in arms .... and] to answer ... enemies, let him say so now, so that [he may be lord of?] the realm and (its various) districts [who] is able to keep and govern the realm” (Humbach and Skjærvø, 3.1, NPi, f4–5,03—G7–11,03).

*Summary.* Altogether, it appears that the designation of the royal successor had to be approved through an acclamation by Persian and Parthian grandees, in order to be effective. The inscription suggests that the right to contest an undesired candidate by the nobiliary council was based on procedural precedence from the time of Šāpur I and encompassed the possibility of contestation by a rival candidate. The non-observance of this procedure could invalidate the king’s accession (Huyse, 2009, pp. 154-55; Weber and Wiesehöfer, p.104). Whether the six modalities (three being necessary and three optional) deemed to be pertinent to the choice of the royal successor, as reported by Procopius (q.v.) in the 6th century CE (Börm, 2008, pp. 433-35) may be substantiated for the early empire, remains unclear. The factors, which seem to matter throughout the Sasanian empire, were certainly (1) the king’s belonging to the royal house of Sāsān; (2) his being the elected choice of the leading faction(s) of the nobility; (3) his being of (ethical and religious) rectitude (protector of the Mazdean faith); and (4) possessing the ability to protect the empire of the Iranians, Ērānšahr, which we may ascribe to the king’s military prowess. Bodily soundness and the concept of primogeniture might have been at work circumstantially.



ROYAL COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES



PLATE I. Relief of Šāpur I at Naqš-e Rostam. Photograph by Ali Mousavi.

The king's discourse (as reflected in royal proclamations and the royal ideology) was disseminated through a network of discrete transmissions, which, whilst complementary to each other, were addressing diverging recipients, whose intellectual predispositions they espoused. In the early empire, the inscriptions of Šāpur I on the *Ka'ba-ye Zardošt* (q.v.) at Naqš-e Rostam and Narseh at Paikuli had radically divergent recipients as their primary, silent "interlocutors": the Roman world in the first instance, and the Persian and Parthian ethno-class/"Persian people in arms" (*pārs ud pahlaw/pārsān kār*), in the second (Shayegan, 2020).



PLATE II. Cameo depicting Šāpur's triumph over the Roman Caesar Valerian. 6.8 x 10.3 x 0.9 cm. © Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, inv. no. Camée 360.

The narrative of Šāpur I's inscription provided a mere backbone of historical context for the three victorious campaigns of the king against the defeated Roman Caesars Gordianus, Philip the Arab, and Valerian, with the latter having to suffer the humiliating fate of being made captive by the Sasanians. Although the themes of Šāpur I's victories were thrust upon the population of the Iranian heartland through a profusion of reliefs, mainly in Persis (southwestern Iran), that were a vivid reminder of the king's nimbus of invincibility (PLATE I), an array of "mobile documents," such as Šāpur's Cameo (PLATE II) and Medallion (Figure 3) were bound to disseminate further the content of the royal narrative(s) within the empire, or the enemy's realm (Shayegan, 2020, pp. 144-49). By adopting Roman aesthetics and motifs (such as the Roman *clementia*) in the iconographical compositions of the Šāpur Cameo and Medallion, the Persian king permitted a Roman audience more intuitively and immediately to grasp Šāpur's message of triumph (for the gesture of *clementia* on Šāpur's Medallion: Lushey, p. 34; von Gall, p. 104; Schneider, 1986, pp. 22-26; 29-50; Alram, Blet-Lemarquand, and Skjærvø, p. 16).



Figure 3. Medallion of Šapur I receiving homage from Philip the Arab executing a genuflection. Alam, Blet-Lemarquand, and Skjærvø, 2007, 19, no. 19.



PLATE III. The “Collot Cameo” depicting an early Sasanian king, perhaps King Narseh? Private collection.



PLATE IV. The obverse of Mithradates II's silver tetradrachm. Type: S(ellwood) 24.2/SNP (Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum) 2, 58 – Type Ib/1b.8 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett nr. 18203098. Photograph by Dirk Sonnenwald, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

In the case of the Šāpur Medallion, the Sasanians, while maintaining the overall conceptual frame of the Roman *clementia* motif, had merely inversed the usual roles of lord and supplicant by casting the Roman Caesar as the recipient and Šāpur as the bestower of *clementia* (Schneider, 2006, p. 243; Alram, Blet-Lemarquand, and Skjærvø, p. 16). The appropriation of this theme, which complemented the more pronouncedly Persian motif of Šāpur's Cameo, bespoke the Sasanian desire to individualize their ideological messages to befit the perceived intellectual dispositions of their target audiences. At the antipodes of Šāpur's *res gestae* stands the inscription of Narseh at Paikuli, whose narrative is the tale of a *coup-d'état*, that is, the seizure of power by a younger son of King Šāpur I, namely, Narseh, king of Armenia (*Arminān šāh*) supported by a faction of the Iranian aristocracy. Narseh's audience was the domestic constituency, to which Narseh time and again refers as *pārs ud pahlaw kē-n xānag bandag ... \*ānānd*, "Persians and Parthians, who were ... subjects in our household," and which reflected the exalted status of Sasanian Parthian houses, who were placed, above all other ethnicities, on an equal footing with the dominant Persian ethno-class. The king's narrative at Paikuli was complemented by the iconography of the newly re-discovered "Collot Cameo" (PLATE III), wherein one may possibly discern Narseh's portrait with features that evoke similarities with the effigy of the Arsacid king Mithradates II on coinage (PLATE IV), and the Hyacinth of (the Duke of) Gotha (PLATE V) that also emulates Arsacid models, but assuredly belongs to the Sasanian era



(Aram and Gyselen, p. 287; Seyrig and Curiel, pp. 55-59; Gignoux, p. 30, no. 3.32; and pl. vii, no. 3.32; Gyselen, 1993, pp. 45, 56, 104, 20.J.1 and pl. 16, 20.J.1; Gyselen, 2007, p. 74). These archaizing, “Parthianizing” tendencies in the depiction of Narseh on the “Collot Cameo” were an artifice to dialogue with the Parthian element among the imperial aristocracy, to whom Narseh owed his throne; once more, we observe the tailoring of the iconographic motifs in royal mobile objects to befit the cultural specificity of the intended audience.

Another cameo, long fallen into desuetude, the “Cameo of Bahrām II” (PLATE VI) much like the Šāpur Cameo and the “Collot Cameo,” was intended for a *specific* audience, likely the Kušāns (KUSHAN DYNASTY) in the East (Shayegan, 2020-21). The iconographic composition of the “Cameo of Bahrām II,” depicts a Sasanian king accompanying the sacred bull Nandī (whose tail, rear, and rump we still can clearly discern), a motif known to us from Kušān and Kušāno-Sasanian coinage (Jongeward, Cribb, and Donovan, pp. 210-11, no. 2211; and pl. 57, no. 2211). The adoption of the Nandī Bull by Bahrām II on his cameo was of symbolic significance, aiming to convey the (re)imposition of Sasanian royal authority in the East that had been seriously shaken by the rebellion of his brother, Hormozd Kušānšāh (q.v.), on whose coinage the Nandī Bull was also well attested (PLATE VII). Bahrām II’s deployment of the cameo for propagandistic purposes was geared toward the Kušān and cosmopolitan élites of the borderlands, by co-opting the iconography of the Nandī Bull and, as such, it represented a pendant to the Šāpur Cameo, not only on account of the technical properties that links them—which may suggest a shared provenance, possibly the selfsame royal ateliers—but also in the purpose they fulfilled as portable objects destined to impress the royal message upon cosmopolitan enemies, or Iranicate élites on the borderland. In sum, in Sasanian Iran, the king’s relation with its virtual “audiences” was highly individualized and sought to negotiate the recipients’ frame of mind, in an effort to ensure the receptivity of the royal discourse.



PLATE V. The Hyacinth of (the Duke of) Gotha depicting possibly King Narseh. © Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, ACQ 1970.392.



PLATE VI. Extant fragment of the cameo representing Bahrām II and the Nandī Bull. 4.4 x 3 cm. Originally attributed to Ardašir I, son of Pābag. © Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, inv. no. Camée 359.



PLATE VII. Gold coin of the wazurg Kušān šāh ‘great king of Kūšān’ Ōhrmazd 1. The obverse represents On̄bo in the company of the Nandī Bull. Image licensed under CC BY-3.0 Unported; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hormizd\\_I\\_Kushanshah\\_circa\\_AD\\_285-300.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hormizd_I_Kushanshah_circa_AD_285-300.jpg); original image CNG Coins).

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